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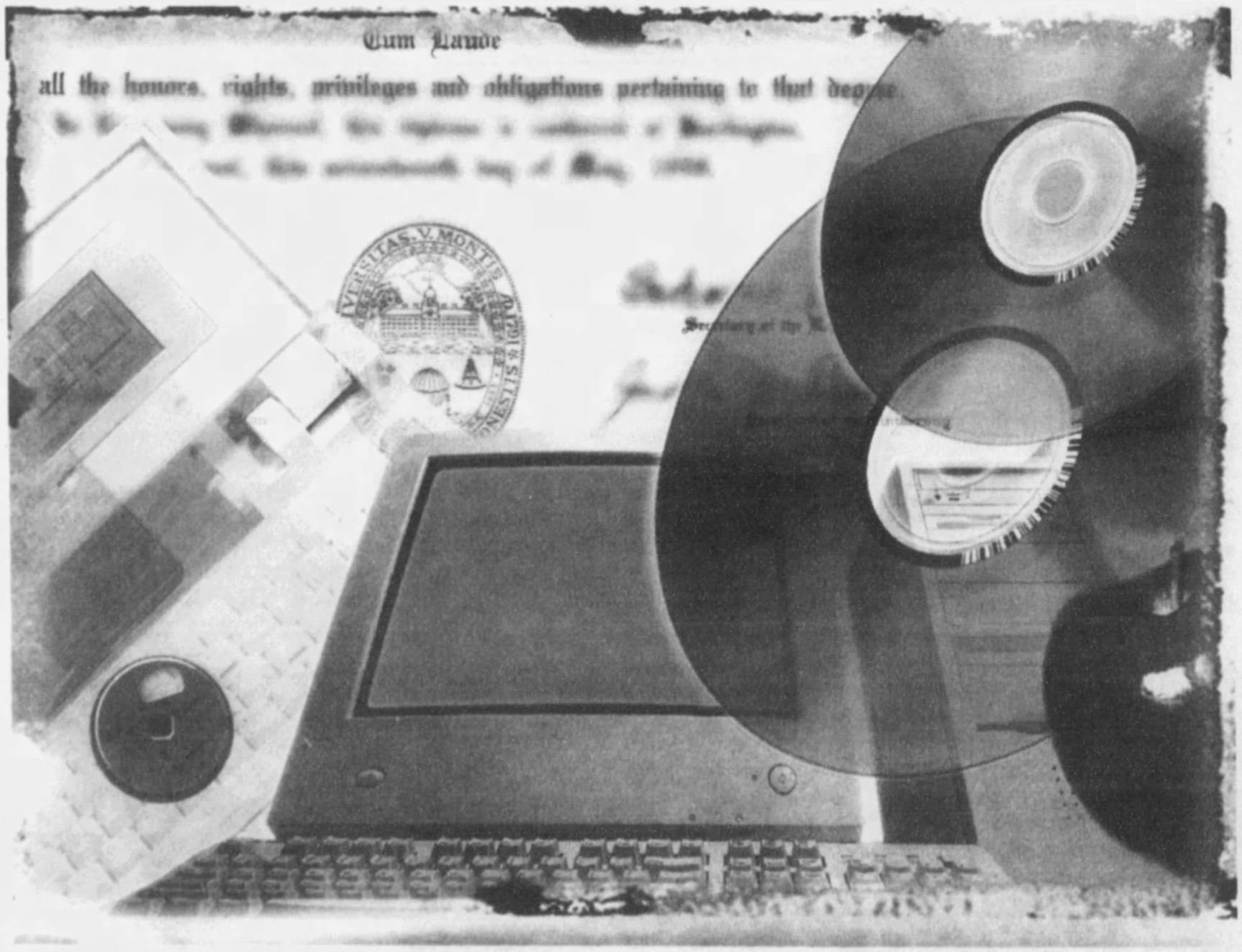
Information systems success stories



Training is the key to IS placement and advancement.

Bobbi Simpson found herself suddenly thrust into the job market in 1994 when she was laid off from her job as a PC support technician at Prudential Insurance. She enrolled in an intensive month-long network administration training course after which she found a new job—then, a better one—in network administration back at Prudential.

That's not the end of her story. Even though she is happy to be at Prudential again, Simpson has continued taking training classes. Lately, she has been taking three-day Microsoft certification courses.

"I'm 100 percent happy that I've taken the classes," she says. Even when a class covers a topic that she's already familiar with, she comes away with something that makes her better at her job. "There are always little ins and outs that you didn't know. That makes it worthwhile."

Training is a national phenomenon, an increasingly popular way to learn new skills or keep on top of what you already know. At the heart of the boom is the tremendous dearth of new talent in information technology fields and the rapid rate of change in the computer industry. Employers are discovering that computer training courses can keep workers' skills fresh. Workers, not satisfied with their current positions, use training to enhance their knowledge and their marketability.

Let's face it: The computer industry moves at the speed of light. It doesn't matter if your first computer experience involved programming with punch cards in the '60s or word processing on a Mac six months ago; things change. Whether your job depends on computers directly or indirectly, it can be a challenge to keep up with the latest technology. Training can be a quick way to brush up on a computer skill or learn a new application—you can find courses such as "Introduction to Microsoft *Word*" that start and finish in only a few hours; more comprehensive curriculums can take months. Most training companies offer a flexible course catalog, including everything from full-time weekday courses to night and weekend-only classes for those juggling a work schedule.

NEED A CERTIFICATE?

If you're looking for official training from a company like Microsoft, you've got it pretty easy: Find a certified trainer, go to class, pass the tests and collect your paper. But there are many topics, such as HTML, that don't need approval from a specific company. "The amazing thing about teaching the Internet is there's no official certification the way there might be for, say, Novell," says Internet trainer Gary Gach. Because there is no accreditation process, there is no guarantee that a course will be worthwhile.

Although official certification courses offer testing and a certificate of completion, Simpson doesn't bother with the tests. "I've never had to take a test and certify—the training has been enough."

Maureen Maggi would agree. She is

nearly finished with a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer program. Even though she doesn't have the certificate yet, "recruiters love it," she says. Just having the classes under her belt has been enough, she says, to expand her technical knowledge and her employment desirability.

Maggi took her classes after work, five days a week. She says although the classes she took were intense, they were a great learning experience. "You're in there for a week and it's like you're a sponge, but you're sponged out at the end of the week," she admits. She rattles off a list of the courses she has completed, including Microsoft *Exchange* 5.0, TCP/IP, Windows NT, Microsoft *Internet Explorer* 4.0 Administration Kit and Web server configuration. Although taking classes as well as working full-time can be taxing, the results can be well worth the effort. She says taking the courses helped her to take a big step forward financially.

It's important to remember that computer training is not a panacea for your career.

For David Lerch, a Certified Netware Administrator certificate was a direct ticket from joblessness to a position at a company that supports the banking and financial industry. It took Lerch two months of training to complete the course and get the certificate. "I applied for the job and was only being considered," he says. "As soon as I told them I got the CNA, I had an interview and was hired."

"Enhancing your computer skills is really related to enhancing your position," says Robert McCauley, president of The Fourth R computer training franchise. "But it's important to remember that computer training is not a panacea for your career. Trainers aren't placement agencies and they can't guarantee that you'll find a place to use your skills. In fact, none of the trainers we talked with keep track of placement of students who complete training."

WHO'S IN CLASS?

Most of the people who take training courses aren't doing it to replace other education, but to enhance it. "Over 80 percent of our students have a degree and half of those have a second degree," says Spencer Brucker, vice chair of applied computing and information systems at the University of California-Berkeley Extension program. "Most who go though certification programs are full-time professionals." Although it takes between 18 and 30 months to complete a certificate program at UC-Berkeley Extension, "a lot of our students take one or two courses that they need to update their skills."

Brucker notes that many of the students at UC Berkeley Extension use the classes as a catalyst for a promotion or a career move. "We've had people go through then start their own consulting businesses. We've had people go to work for major consultants. We've had people use a certificate in place of an advanced degree to get a promotion. One-quarter of his students are interested in a career change and use their newfound knowledge to move toward new opportunities," she says.

UC-Berkeley Extension has about 500 enrolled students and has graduated more than 400 in the past four years. The majority do this after work and on the weekends, Brucker says.

ONLINE TRAINING

If there's no training facility in your area or you simply prefer to learn on your own, consider an online training course. Ziff Davis University (http://www.zdu. com) offers more than 50 courses. Participants interact with the instructor and classmates via a Web-based message board. Lessons and assignments all take place on the Web and classes range from programming to databases to *Photoshop*.

According to George Kane, director of ZDU, online training can keep one ahead of the technology curve better than traditional classroom-based courses. Online, according to Kane, you can be among the first trained in a new computing technology. Online training is a flexible way to learn new skills, but isn't the way to go if you're concerned about having a certificate.

An advantage of ZDU is its low cost—students can take an unlimited number of classes for a flat fee of $4.95 per month. Of ZDU's 37,000 registered users, 20 percent are self-employed and each takes an average of three courses. According to Kane, participants generally are people who use computers or the Web at work and need to learn new computer skills to stay up to date. "This is a way to learn new skills without taking three days out of your job," says Kane. "You can do it in your pajamas or on your lunch break because it's asynchronous."

Then again, if your twice-used ThighMaster is lost somewhere under a pile of dirty laundry and you never quite managed to finish that correspondence course, online training is probably not for you. Participating in a class with other students and an interested trainer is probably a better bet for those with carefully honed procrastination skills.

IS TRAINING FUTURE

Anyone who's ever had to learn the ins and outs of a new software version or has been forced to learn a new programming language knows that what you knew yesterday isn't necessarily what you need to know today. "People understand that knowledge in computer information systems gets old fast," Brucker says. Computer training can't guarantee that you'll move up the corporate ladder or that you'll find a job at all. With careful selection of courses, however, it can be an quick way to enhance your skills, your résumé and your desirability in the eyes of employers. CU

(Kevin Savetz writes from northern California.)

Tips on selecting a training provider

Look in the phone book and you will find an abundance of computer trainers, from big-name franchises to one-person operations run out of a basement. Choosing a trainer who suits your needs and schedule can be a daunting task. Choosing a good trainer means asking the right questions—and getting the right answers—up front.

"The first thing you should look at is the materials they hand out," says Robert McCauley, president of The Fourth R computer training franchise. The participant manual handed out by the instructor is a cornerstone to a training course, McCauley says. Ask to see it before you join the class. "Ask if they have one," he says. "Does it look like it was just whipped together in a few hours? How many pages is it? Does it give step-by-step instructions?"

A well-written training manual must help you learn or remember a process when the instructor is not around. "The learning experience does not stop with four hours of classroom training," he says. Next, look at the scheduling and duration of classes. It can be difficult to learn new material in big chunks.

"We don't like to teach over four hours; we prefer to do two- to three-hour classes," McCauley says.

Also consider the facilities. "There should be one computer per individual and all of them [should be] the same," McCauley says. If you must share a computer with someone, "kiss it off before you even start."

Of course, the cost of the training is also a factor. One can't say that prices are irrelevant, but are they competitive? A six-hour class such as Introduction to Microsoft *Word* course might cost $100 to $200. —*K.S.*